



Beyond Anthropocentrism: Reading the Inanimate in Tagore's *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha*

Shampa Mondal

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Asansol Girls' College, West Bengal, India

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Abstract— This paper explores the eco-philosophical and non-anthropocentric aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha*, that reassures the relationship between human and non-human worlds. In *Balai*, the protagonist's intimate and affective bond with plant life reveals an alternative ontology in which botanical existence is infused with agency, subjectivity, and emotional resonance. The child's sensitivity to trees challenges dominant anthropocentric hierarchies, aligning with the principles of Deep Ecology, particularly its emphasis on the intrinsic value of all living beings. *Ghater Kotha* articulates the inner psychological world of Kusum through the point of view of the ghat—an ostensibly inanimate structure that becomes a preserver of memory, desire, and silent witnessing. Here, the inanimate is not lifeless or inert; rather, it emerges as a participant in human experience, questioning the rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate, subject and object. Both stories reveal a continuum of existence where emotional and existential states are mediated through nature and objects, suggesting a relational ontology rooted in interdependence and coexistence. This study asserts that Tagore's short stories articulate an eco-philosophy that decentralizes the human and reimagines the inanimate as equally living and expressive in order to offer a nuanced literary model for rethinking ecological ethics in the modern age.



Keywords— Eco-philosophical, non-anthropocentric, botanical, emotional, inanimate, ecological

I. INTRODUCTION

The environmental consciousness of Rabindranath Tagore stands as one of the most crucial and philosophically rich discourse of his literary oeuvre. Not only his poetry and essays have often been foregrounded in discussions of nature but also his short stories offer a subtler yet equally profound articulation of ecological thought. Tagore's treatment of nature is never static, he envisions it as a sentient, participatory presence that coexists with human life. In Tagore's vision, the boundary between human subjectivity and the external environment is permeable. Nature is not "other" but intimately entangled with human emotion, memory, and consciousness. This relational ontology resonates with Upanishadic notions of the unity of all existence and also aligns with contemporary ecological theories that emphasize interconnectedness and the agency of the non-human.

This analysis centers on Deep Ecology, as articulated by Arne Naess, which posits that all forms of life possess intrinsic value independent of their utility to humans. Deep ecology challenges the instrumental view of nature and advocates for an expanded sense of self that includes the non-human world. This concept is particularly relevant to *Balai*, where the protagonist's identification with plant life fits what Naess terms the "ecological self." The broader field of ecocriticism, shaped by thinkers such as Cheryll Glotfelty examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism supports the methodological basis for analyzing how Tagore's narratives represent nature not as a backdrop but as an active participant in meaning-making. Through this lens, both *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha* can be read as texts that advocate ecological interdependence and critique anthropocentric modes of perception.

Posthumanist theory, as developed by scholars like Rosi Braidotti, further supports this analysis by decentering the human subject and emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human agencies. Posthumanism critiques the hierarchical binaries of human/non-human and animate/inanimate and proposes a networked ontology of coexistence in the ecosystem. Tagore's narratives resonate with this perspective by presenting a world in which human identity is not autonomous but constituted through relationships with nature and material surroundings.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading inanimate in *Balai*

Rabindranath Tagore engages the readers in a deeply moving narrative in *Balai* that reorients emotional and ethical attention away from human-centered relationships. The story begins with an irreparable loss for a child: Balai, having lost his mother, is left by his father in the care of his uncle and aunt. This early disconnection from parental affection shapes Balai's withdrawn and contemplative nature. Unlike other children of his age, he does not participate in conventional social play but bonds with nature. His engagement exemplifies what Deep Ecology terms an expansion of the self into the non-human realm, where identity is constituted through ecological relationships rather than human social structures. The silk-cotton tree (*shimul*) becomes the central symbol of this bond. Balai's attachment to this tree represents a form of emotional anchoring in a life otherwise marked by instability. He attentively watches it grow, attends to its presence, and invests it with a sense of companionship. The tree, in turn, becomes an extension of Balai's own being—quiet, rooted, and vulnerable. The narrative takes a tragic turn when Balai's father returns and decides to take him away from his present family. This impending separation from his familiar environment marks an emotional rupture in Balai's life. Yet what is striking is not Balai's attachment to people, but his concern for the tree. Before permanently leaving for England, he expresses a desire for a photograph of the silk-cotton tree, reinforcing his deepest emotional investment in the non-human world that has sustained him.

The cutting down of the *shimul* tree is justified as practical and inevitable but Tagore critiques the emotional and ethical cost of such an act. It further reveals that such decisions are made by authority figures who neither understand nor value the emotional or ecological bonds. Balai's forthcoming migration and the uprooting of the tree expose a shared condition of vulnerability between human and the non-human. This parallel incidents erases the assumed hierarchy between human life and plant life—

suggesting that both can be equally subjected to violence under utilitarian logic.

Balai's deep attachment for the tree doesn't vanish after his displacement; rather, it continues as an affective trace that reshapes his aunt's perception. In mourning the tree, she mourns the loss of Balai's presence—“To her, that tree had been the image of Balai—his life's friend.” (Tagore, 259). The tree thus becomes a symbolic double of the child, reinforcing the idea that human and non-human lives are intertwined. Furthermore, from a posthumanist perspective, the story destabilizes the human-centered subjectivity by emphasising the silk-cotton tree as an active participant in shaping consciousness.

Balai is not just a story of a sensitive child; it is a critique of anthropocentric modernity and a meditation on the profound connections between human and non-human existence. Tagore invites readers to reconsider the boundaries of life, agency, and emotional belonging. His grief at the destruction of trees underscores an emotional recognition of non-human suffering. Balai's character becomes a site through which Tagore articulates a form of ecological subjectivity—one that is receptive, empathetic, and attuned to the silent life of nature.

Reading inanimate in *Ghater Kotha*

Rabindranath Tagore develops a strikingly non-anthropocentric narrative in *Ghater Kotha* by positioning the ghat—the stone steps of the river—as the narrator. The ghat becomes a silent observer in Kusum's life. Kusum's inner world—marked by longing, confinement, and unarticulated desire—finds expression through her interactions with this seemingly lifeless structure. The ghat becomes a witnessing presence, one that observes, remembers, and feels in ways that human characters fail to do. Tagore unsettles the distinction between animate and inanimate through his narrative strategy.

The character of Kusum is thus intricately linked with the spatial and material environment of the ghat. Her limited social mobility and constrained life find a counterpoint in the enduring, silent companionship of the non-human world. Unlike Balai, whose engagement with nature is direct and organic, Kusum's relationship is mediated through the built environment. The ghat becomes an extension of her consciousness, a site where her unspoken emotions are both felt and seen.

Tagore's lyrical description of nature—water, trees, sky, birds, insects—portrays a world saturated with life and movement. Nature is not background but a vibrant field of interconnected agencies. The river flows as an emotional force and the surrounding elements participate in a shared enthusiasm. This sensibility resonates with ecocriticism and extends toward material ecocriticism, where even non-

living matter is understood as expressive. The ghat, though made of stone, is endowed with a remarkable capacity for perception. It observes indiscriminately, empathetically, and lovingly, suggesting a form of attention that is non-hierarchical and inclusive. Unlike human observers, who are often limited by social norms and indifference, the ghat registers human existence without judgment. It becomes a silent archivist of lives, holding within itself traces of countless stories. This narrative strategy aligns with posthumanist ideas that decenter the human and recognize distributed forms of agency.

The ghat singles out Kusum, noting her "quality of sweetness". This recognition is significant—it suggests that the inanimate can discern emotional and ethical qualities that remain invisible to society. As Kusum's life unfolds, the ghat becomes her most attentive witness. It narrates her early marriage and her return as a child widow. Kusum's emotional isolation is articulated through the ghat's understanding in the subtle yet stark statement, "Kusum was quite alone." (Tagore, 34). Her loneliness is not merely social; it is existential, and it is registered by the non-human world. Kusum's affinity with water forms the emotional core of her character as the ghat remarks, "There was a strange affinity between her heart and the water." (Tagore, 39). It suggests a profound identification between human feeling and natural flow. Water, in Tagore's eco-philosophy, often symbolizes continuity, dissolution, and transcendence. For Kusum, it becomes both companion and mirror, reflecting her inner turbulence and longing. Her repeated presence at the ghat indicates a search for solace beyond the confines of human society, which has marginalized her as a widow.

As time passes, the ghat observes Kusum's transformation into youthful beauty which remains unnoticed to others by her faded clothing and sorrowful demeanor. Tagore draws a powerful contrast: while human society fails to see her, the inanimate ghat perceives her fully. This inversion challenges anthropocentric assumptions about perception and value. The stone, often considered lifeless, becomes more perceptive and compassionate than the living community.

The arrival of the sannyasi introduces a turning point in Kusum's life. His presence brings a temporary illumination—Kusum becomes his devotee, and the "dark shadow" on her face appears to lift. However, this relationship gradually shifts from spiritual devotion to emotional attachment. Kusum's longing, shaped by years of deprivation and silence, crosses social and religious boundaries. Her confession of love, marked by both vulnerability and guilt, reflects the internalization of social constraints. The sannyasi insisted that Kusum must forget

him, highlighting the rigid moral order that Kusum momentarily transcended. This rejection intensifies her isolation, closing off the possibility of both spiritual and emotional fulfillment. In this moment, the ghat remains the only entity that fully registers the depth of her despair.

Kusum's final act of descending into the river and immersing herself in its flow is tragic and symbolically charged. The river, with which she has always shared an affinity, becomes the site of her dissolution. This act can be read not only as an escape from suffering but also as a merging with the natural world that has consistently acknowledged her existence. In contrast to the human world that denies her agency and voice, the river receives her without judgment.

Through the narrative voice of the ghat, Tagore constructs a world in which the inanimate is not inert but deeply responsive. The ghat's witnessing presence affirms the emotional reality of Kusum's life, offering a form of recognition absent in human society. This challenges the limitations of human consciousness and suggests a more expansive understanding of perception and empathy.

Ghater Kotha presents Tagore's eco-philosophical vision by narrating a continuum where human and non-human, animate and inanimate, are intricately intertwined. The story not only foregrounds the suffering of an individual woman but also reimagines the role of the material world as an active participant in human experience. Through Kusum and the ghat, Tagore articulates a powerful critique of social blindness and simultaneously proposes an alternative, more inclusive mode of being, one that acknowledges the profound presence of the non-human world.

Comparative Study of *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha*

Balai and Kusum represent two distinct yet interconnected modes of ecological engagement. A comparative reading of *Boalai* and *Ghater Kotha* reveals a shared eco-philosophical vision grounded in non-anthropocentrism, where both human and non-human realms participate equally in the formation of emotional and existential meaning. Despite their different narrative structures and settings, both stories foreground isolation as a defining condition of their protagonists—Balai and Kusum—while simultaneously presenting nature and the inanimate world as spaces of refuge, recognition, and silent companionship. Isolation operates as a central thematic bridge between the two texts. Balai, in the absence of his parents, could not establish a secure connection with the people around him. Kusum, a child widow in a rigid rural social order, experiences profound loneliness and social erasure. In both cases, the human world remains indifferent to their inner lives. Their emotional needs remain unacknowledged within human society.

It is within this context of alienation that the non-human world emerges as a site of solace. In *Balai*, plants—and particularly the shimul (silk-cotton) tree—become companions that respond to the child's sensitivity. In *Ghater Kotha*, the ghat assumes a parallel role. As an inanimate narrator, it observes Kusum's life with empathy, patience, and non-judgmental awareness. Unlike the human community, which fails to see or understand her, the ghat acknowledges her growth, her suffering, and her emotional truth. Both texts thus position the non-human—the inanimate as a repository for unspoken emotions. The plants in *Balai* and the ghat in *Ghater Kotha* provide shelter for affective experiences that cannot be expressed within the constraints of human society. They listen without judgment, respond without domination, and exist without imposing social norms. This stands in stark contrast to the human world, which is marked by indifference, control, and a failure of empathy.

The socio-spatial contexts of the two stories further deepen this comparison. *Balai* is situated within an emerging urban, materialistic environment where adult priorities override the emotional world of the child. The arrival of Balai's father initiates a series of dislocations—he is removed from his familiar surroundings, sent to boarding school, and ultimately prepared for departure to England. This movement reflects a broader colonial-modern trajectory that alienates individuals from their ecological roots. The cutting down of the shimul tree by his uncle—despite Balai's earlier efforts to protect it from decided "death sentence"—symbolizes the violence of anthropocentric rationality. In contrast, *Ghater Kotha* unfolds in a rural setting governed by rigid social and moral codes. Kusum, married at a young age and widowed soon after, is left to navigate a life defined by restriction and silence. Kusum's final act—her immersion in the river—becomes both an escape and a tragic culmination of her isolation. Her longing for dissolution is poignantly captured by Tagore, "...now that she is weary, if the water were not to reach out to draw her to its lap, who else would do so?" (Tagore, 39). This moment raises a critical question about the function of the human world which fails to protect Kusum's life.

A key point of contrast lies in narrative perspective. In *Ghater Kotha*, the ghat as narrator embodies empathy and continuity; it bears witness to Kusum's life without interruption or judgment. In *Balai*, however, the human narrative framework reflects a degree of indifference. The ghat preserves and honors Kusum's story, the human world in *Balai* participates in erasing Balai's emotional landscape. Balai's identification with plants and Kusum's affinity with water both suggest a movement toward what deep ecology terms the "ecological self"—a self that is expanded beyond

human confines to include the more-than-human world. *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha* converge in their portrayal of nature and the inanimate as ethical and emotional counterparts to human existence. They expose the limitations of a human-centered worldview and propose instead a relational ontology grounded in empathy, coexistence, and mutual recognition. In doing so, Tagore not only critiques the failures of human society but also reimagines the possibilities of belonging within a broader ecological universe.

III. CONCLUSION

The close and comparative readings of *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha* demonstrate that Rabindranath Tagore articulates a deeply nuanced eco-philosophical vision that challenges the primacy of the human and reimagines the boundaries of life, agency, and emotional belonging. Across both texts, Tagore dismantles anthropocentric hierarchies by foregrounding the vitality of the more-than-human world—whether in the form of plants or inanimate structures—and by presenting them as active participants in human experience.

The plants in *Balai* and the ghat and river in *Ghater Kotha* emerge not as passive surroundings but as responsive presences that receive, reflect, and sustain the protagonists' inner lives. These entities become silent companions, ethical witnesses, and repositories of unspoken emotions. In contrast, the human world appears fragmented, indifferent, and often complicit in the protagonists' suffering—whether through neglect, social rigidity, or utilitarian violence.

Through this juxtaposition, Tagore advances a vision that resonates strongly with Deep Ecology and Posthumanist thought. His narratives suggest that the human is not a sovereign center but part of a larger, interconnected web of existence. At the same time, Tagore's work raises critical questions about the ethical failures of human society. The cutting down of the shimul tree and Kusum's tragic immersion in the river are not merely narrative events; they symbolize the consequences of a worldview that denies the value of both non-human life and marginalized human existence.

Tagore does not simply romanticize nature as an escape. Instead, he presents it as an alternative mode of being—one grounded in attentiveness, coexistence, and mutual recognition. His stories invite a rethinking of ecological ethics, where care extends beyond the human and where even the inanimate is acknowledged as meaningful and expressive. *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha* offer a powerful literary articulation of an eco-philosophy that remains strikingly relevant in the contemporary context of environmental crisis and ethical re-evaluation.

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